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HISTORY

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ANCIENT

WORLD

Timothy E. Gregory

A History of Byzantium

Second Edition

 WILEY-BLACKWELL



11

The Apogee of Byzantine Power

	250	500	750	1000	1250	1500
963						
976						
989						
1014						
1028						
1054						
1071						

Nikephoros II Phokas (963–969) and John I Tzimiskes (969–973)

In 963 Romanos II suddenly died, leaving his young sons, Basil II and Constantine VIII, as nominal rulers: Basil was 5 years old and Constantine 3. Romanos' wife Theophano assumed the regency and she formed an arrangement with Nikephoros Phokas, who had already been saluted by his troops as emperor. Theophano offered Nikephoros her hand in marriage and Nikephoros II Phokas (963–9) became emperor and, at the same time, defender of the rights of the two young emperors born in the purple. Thus, for the first time in Byzantine history a member of the Anatolian military aristocracy came to the throne.

Nikephoros replaced Joseph Bringas as *parakoimomenos* (chamberlain) with Basil, an illegitimate son of Romanos Lekapenos. The position of *domestikos* in the East was given to John Tzimiskes, who had already won considerable reputation as a general, while Byzantine forces in the West were commanded by the

emperor's brother, Leo Phokas.

Nikephoros was rugged, physically unattractive, and unusually devoted to monks and asceticism. When not on active military campaign, he lived a life of prayer and self-mortification, and some of his best friends were monks. Among these was St. Athanasios, founder of the monastery of Lavra on Mount Athos, and the emperor was one of the first patrons of that famous center of Byzantine monasticism.

Founding of Mount Athos

From the days of early Christianity it was common for monks to gather in large groups in remote and desert places, many on mountains. These monastic retreats then frequently became holy centers, to which the faithful flocked, either to seek miraculous interventions or simply to share in the sanctity of the holy men and women who lived there. Such mountain retreats in the early Byzantine period were Mount Sinai, Mount Auxentios, and the Wondrous Mountain of St. Symeon the Stylite the Younger. In the eighth century Mount Olympos in Bithynia became the most celebrated mountain center of monasticism. This was a large complex on Ulu Dağ, near modern Brusa, that was founded in the fifth century and eventually contained some 50 monasteries, all but one of them inhabited by men. The monasteries of Olympos were all independent establishments with no common organization, but other similar communities, such as Mount Latros, were monastic confederacies under a single *hegoumenos* (abbot) or *protos* ("first" monk).

Mount Athos, usually called in Greek simply *Agion Oros* (the Holy Mountain), forms the easternmost projection of the Chalkidike peninsula in Macedonia, east of Thessaloniki. It is today a spectacularly beautiful area, in part because it has been spared the traumas of modern development. The mountain itself is near the southern tip of the peninsula, and the rest of the area is rolling woodland mixed with plots of arable land, scored by innumerable streams that rush down from the heights. There are traditions that monks had settled on the peninsula in the early Byzantine period or fled there from the Arab invasions or the Iconoclast persecutions, but these cannot be historically substantiated. The first historical references to monasteries on the peninsula date to the ninth century, and an edict of Basil I in 883 provided imperial protection for the monks from local shepherds.

The crucial event for the development of Mount Athos, however, was

Athanasios' foundation of Megiste Lavra (the Great Lavra) in 963 with the support of Nikephoros Phokas. Athanasios was a teacher from Trebizond who settled in Constantinople and formed strong alliances with members of the aristocratic families of the time, including that of Nikephoros Phokas. He maintained those connections when he entered the monastic life and ca. 958 he moved to Mount Athos, where he sought to reform monasticism, in part by the foundation of larger monasteries. With the help of Nikephoros II he began a tradition of monasticism on Mount Athos that has lasted to our own time, surviving the fall of the empire by over half a millennium. Many more monasteries were founded in subsequent centuries, some of them originally inhabited by monks from particular areas, for example, Iveron (ca. 980, by Iberians (Georgians)), Hilandar (refounded 1198 as a Serbian monastery), and Panteleemon (refounded 1169 as a Russian monastery). Many of the monasteries became extraordinarily wealthy, owning far-flung lands and engaging in important cultural activities including the transmission of Byzantine culture to people beyond the empire's frontier. Their libraries and storerooms remain important depositories of Byzantine material up to the present.

Figure 11.1 The *katholikon* (public church) of Megiste Lavra (the Great Lavra), the oldest monastery on Mount Athos. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



The Policies of Nikephoros II and John I

Tzimiskes

As a member of the military aristocracy, Nikephoros was opposed to the Macedonian dynasty's policy of restricting the purchase of peasant farms by wealthy landowners. His legislation did not exactly revoke that of his predecessors, but it changed some details that showed clearly that the state would no longer pursue a policy of protecting the poor landowners. On the other hand, Nikephoros sought to defend the land belonging to soldiers and, probably in light of the growing cost of military equipment, he increased the minimum holding of a soldier from four pounds of gold to 12. This probably was a reflection of changes in military technique and the tendency toward heavier (and thus more expensive) armor, and it signaled a significant move away from dependence on a militia of peasants: a farm worth a minimum of 12 pounds of gold was hardly a peasant holding. Further, Nikephoros' religious and ascetic sensibilities were against the growth of ecclesiastical and monastic wealth, and he issued legislation that sought to put a stop to the growth of estates belonging to the church – probably for moral rather than for economic or social reasons.

Even after becoming emperor Nikephoros took the field himself. He fought a long and ultimately successful campaign against the Arabs in Cilicia and then in Syria. His generals took the island of Cyprus in 965 and Antioch and Aleppo in 968. Syria was divided in half; the northern part was annexed by Byzantium, and the south, while independent, was effectively under Byzantine control. Thus, Byzantine arms were everywhere triumphant in the East, and areas lost to the Arabs more than three centuries earlier were once more restored to the empire. The situation in the West was more complicated, especially because of the revival of the Western Empire under Otto I, who was crowned emperor in 962 and who involved himself heavily in Italy. Like Charlemagne before him, Otto sought accommodation with Byzantium, and in 968 he dispatched the bishop Liudprand of Cremona as an emissary to Constantinople, for the purpose of arranging a marriage alliance between his son and one of the sisters of the legitimate Macedonian emperors. Nikephoros treated Liudprand harshly and decisively rejected the offer of alliance.

In the Balkans Nikephoros likewise acted decisively, although in the end without great success. He rejected Bulgarian demands for the payment of tribute and followed earlier Byzantine diplomatic precedent by calling on aid from the Russian prince Svjatoslav (the son of Olga) who had recently destroyed the Khazar state. Svjatoslav easily defeated the Bulgars in 968 and 969, deposed the

Bulgarian tsar Boris II, and essentially took the country over. He apparently even considered moving his capital to Little Preslav in Bulgaria. As a result, Byzantium found the Russians on the very border of the empire, a situation that was to vex emperors for some time to come.

Meanwhile, the empress Theophano apparently tired of Nikephoros' physical appearance and monastic habits, and hatched a plot with the emperor's chief general, John Tzimiskes. The conspirators murdered the emperor in his bedroom in December 969.

John I Tzimiskes (969–76) was crowned only after he had agreed to the patriarch's demand that he do penance for the murder and separate from Theophano, who was sent away to a monastery. He then married Theodora, the daughter of Constantine VII, and, like his predecessor, he assumed the role of guardian of the young emperors. Civil affairs were left in the hands of Basil the *parakoimomenos*. Tzimiskes had to put down several revolts from

Box 11.1 Byzantine Houses

We actually have very little evidence about what kinds of houses the Byzantines lived in. Naturally these would have varied from time to time, depending on the climate and the economic situation of the owner. In the early Byzantine period ancient Mediterranean house types obviously continued to be built and some of the villas of the wealthy were quite lavish, whether in the city or in the country. A number of these villas of the fourth to sixth centuries have been excavated; they were commonly developed versions of Roman houses, with frescoed walls and floors of marble and mosaic. They often had elaborate dining areas and peristyled courtyards. In the sixth to seventh centuries there is evidence that some owners were not able to maintain these lavish buildings, and many of them began to be broken up into smaller units that were presumably rented out to help pay the bills.

In the middle and later Byzantine periods it is clear that some large houses were built, and a few of them have been found in archaeological excavations. Many of these were rectangular, with a courtyard in the center. The ground floor was used for storage, workshops, and stables for animals, while the living accommodations were on the upper floor. The buildings were often of irregular shape and they were crowded along narrow lanes, apparently without any thought for a planned arrangement. The houses were built of poor material and the walls were commonly constructed of two faces of uncut stone filled with a mixture of small stones and dirt; the faces of the walls could be covered with a soil plaster and then whitewashed or even painted. Mud bricks were also frequently used, especially in the upper reaches of a wall. Even the houses of the wealthy might be irregular and the eleventh-century historian Michael Atalliates described his house in Constantinople as a complex of several buildings surrounding a court, with a ground floor and a second story that projected out over the courtyard; it also had a grain mill driven by a donkey and – something that became relatively common in the later Byzantine period – a private chapel.

Although houses would not normally have had running water, arrangements were commonly made for toilets, at least in the city houses of the more well-to-do. The legal documents provide considerable information about these, since sewage and the location of toilets might be a matter of

considerable disagreement among neighbors. Toilets that emptied into cesspools were often located in the courtyard of a house. The Byzantines also used chamber pots made of various materials; poorer houses probably had very rudimentary sanitation facilities. Byzantine law forbade throwing human waste out the window, but there are reports that this restriction was not always maintained. The twelfth-century poet John Tzetzes complained that the children and the pigs of the deacon who lived above him in Constantinople “urinated so much that they produced navigable rivers.”

In the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries the houses of wealthy Byzantines were influenced by trends from the West, especially Italy, and the houses, for example, at Mystras were characterized by second-story balconies supported by arcades, pointed windows, towers, and large interior halls.

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aristocratic rivals, and his greatest ally was his brother-in-law, Bardas Skleros. Although Tzimiskes himself was, like his predecessor, a member of the military aristocracy, he sought actively to prevent the alienation of private peasant lands and the transformation of the peasants into *paroikoi*. The legislation to effect this was already in place, and Tzimiskes used military power to round up the peasants settled on private estates and force them to return to their villages. In this he can hardly have been fully successful and, in effect, the peasants so treated became essentially the *paroikoi* of the state.

Tzimiskes was faced with a difficult situation in the Balkans, where the Russian prince Svjatoslav had secured increasing authority over Bulgaria. In 971 Tzimiskes occupied the Bulgarian capital of Great Preslav and took the tsar Boris captive. He then moved on the city of Silistria, which Svjatoslav had occupied. After a desperate siege and an equally desperate resistance, Tzimiskes prevailed and Svjatoslav was forced to withdraw. He was killed shortly thereafter, and Tzimiskes was in effective control of Bulgaria. Tzimiskes was also able to deal successfully with the western emperor Otto II by agreeing to the marriage alliance his predecessor had rejected but sending, not an imperial princess born in the purple, but his own relative Theophano, who became the wife of Otto II in 972. This marriage was to have a significant effect on East–West relations, especially in the impact of Byzantine ideas on the western court. Theophano had considerable influence on her son, Otto III, who became western emperor in 983, and who copied Byzantine ceremonial and asserted the

supremacy of the emperor over the pope.

In the East Tzimiskes sought to consolidate and expand the conquests made by Nikephoros Phokas. In this he was opposed by the Shiite dynasty of the Fatimids, who, after their conquest of Egypt in 973, tried to exploit the power vacuum in Syria. Tzimiskes, however, relieved Fatimid pressure on Antioch and pressed far into Syria and the Holy Land, taking Damascus, Tiberias, Caesarea, and stopping not far from the walls of Jerusalem. He returned victorious to Byzantium, conquering Beirut and Sidon on the way. Unfortunately for the empire, this vigorous and successful emperor suddenly took ill and died, early in 976.

The Reign of Basil II (976–1025)

It was in this context that Basil II, then 18 years of age, at last took power in his own name. It is true that throughout his reign he shared the throne with his younger brother Constantine VIII (two years his junior), but power was always effectively in Basil's hands, and Constantine was content to enjoy palace life and leave the burdens of rule to his brother. For years, at least since the death of Romanos II in 968, members of the military aristocracy, who ruled in the names of the legitimate Macedonian emperors, had controlled the empire. Now, in 976, the *domestikos* Bardas Skleros expected to continue that tradition, and he rose in revolt when Basil II declared himself fit to rule on his own. There followed a monumental clash in which the young emperor displayed his own determination and strength of character, helped as he was by the cleverness of Basil the *parakoimomenos*. Skleros at first defeated all the forces sent against him and by 978 he had all of Asia Minor under his control. The *parakoimomenos*, however, formed an alliance with the head of a rival aristocratic family, Bardas Phokas, nephew of the emperor Nikephoros Phokas, and they were able to defeat Skleros and force him to flee to the caliphate.

During the next few years Basil the *parakoimomenos* was essentially in control, as he had been for years, but Basil II finally sought to establish his independence and, despite a plot by the eunuch for Bardas Phokas to seize power, the emperor triumphed, and the venerable *parakoimomenos* was finally removed from power and exiled in 985.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of the confused situation in Constantinople, a revolt against Byzantine power had broken out in the Balkans, led by the

Kometopouloi, the four sons of a provincial governor in Macedonia. This revolt was welcomed by the local people, and, from 987 onward, leadership was assumed by Samuel, the youngest of the Kometopouloi, who was founder of the second period of Bulgarian greatness in the Middle Ages. Even though the center of power in this state was at Ochrid, in Slavic Macedonia (far from the earlier center at Pliska), both Samuel and the Byzantines regarded it as the direct descendant of the empire of Symeon some 150 years earlier. One of the first things Samuel did was to restore the independent Bulgarian patriarchate that had been abolished by Tzimiskes.

Samuel sought to expand his territory to the south, with attacks on Serres and Thessaloniki, and in 985 or 986 he succeeded in taking Larissa (in Thessaly). Basil II counterattacked in 986, but his forces were defeated in a monumental battle at Trajan's Gate. In part as a result of this failure, members of the Byzantine aristocracy again revolted. Bardas Skleros returned from exile, once more sought the imperial throne and, as before, he was opposed by Bardas Phokas. On this occasion, however, Phokas too revolted and had himself proclaimed emperor (987). Phokas quickly became the main pretender, and by the beginning of 988 he was prepared for an assault on the capital. In this situation Basil II called on the Russian prince Vladimir (the son of Svjatoslav) for assistance. The latter dispatched a force of 6,000 warriors, presumably Vikings from Russia, and, led by the emperor in person, they dealt a decisive defeat to Phokas, who died in battle the next year. Bardas Skleros once again rose in revolt, but he was quickly defeated, and Basil II's throne was secured, largely with the help of his Russian ally. Basil II had waited 17 years to be emperor in his own name and he struggled another 13 years to defeat his aristocratic rivals, but in 989 he was master of the Byzantine world.

As a reward for his assistance, Vladimir was offered Basil's sister Anna as his bride, on condition that the prince and his people accept baptism from Constantinople. This was an enormous compromise by the Byzantines and an indication of how much the emperor valued his alliance with the Russians: no purple-born princess had previously ever been offered to a foreign ruler. Certainly, from the Russian point of view, the alliance was equally positive, and the conversion of Olga (Vladimir's grandmother) some years earlier and the strength of Byzantine arms under Tzimiskes had undoubtedly convinced Vladimir that the future of his state lay in alliance with Byzantium. The Russian Primary Chronicle, of course, explains the conversion in terms of a Russian search for a religion best suited to the Russian temperament. This story, which

certainly cannot be literally true, says that the prince sent out a body of ten officials to visit the homelands of the great religions of the time: the Volga Bulgars (who were Muslims), the Khazars (who were Jews), the Germans (who were Catholic Christians), and the “Greeks” (who were Orthodox Christians). The emissaries found objections to the first three religions, but they reported that in the church of Constantinople, presumably Hagia Sophia, “we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendour or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men.” In fact, it is likely that Vladimir realized – as had many of his Slavic predecessors – that alliance with one Christian power or another was all but inevitable and that the Byzantine political tradition provided important benefits for the consolidation of his own domestic power and the cultural advancement of the principality. The Byzantines temporarily rethought the awarding of a purple-born princess to such a ruler, but in 989 Vladimir made a military show of force in Cherson, and the marriage was solemnly celebrated; Vladimir accepted baptism, and the conversion of Russia was begun.

In the view of the historian Psellos, Basil’s character had been radically changed as a result of the long struggle with Bardas Phokas, Bardas Skleros, and the landed aristocracy. From a pleasure-loving youth he turned into a hardened and resolute politician and commander; he was dour and shorttempered and – unlike his forefathers – he had no interest in literature or learning. In keeping with his personality he dedicated himself completely to the task of ruling the empire and, most important, he never married and had no sons to succeed him as emperor.

In terms of land policy Basil II was, not surprisingly, one of the most outspoken critics of the growth of aristocratic holdings and a defender of the

Box 11.2 Digenes Akritas

Digenes Akritas is often seen as the archetypal Byzantine hero, comparable perhaps to Roland in the medieval West or to Achilles or Aeneas in the ancient world. He is known only from a long poem that is preserved in several different Greek and one Slavic versions. The poem tells the story of Digenes’ father, an Arab emir who fell in love with the daughter of a Byzantine general. The emir snatched the girl away from her family, but a reconciliation was made with them and he became a Christian. The poem goes on to talk about the birth and childhood of Digenes (which means “born of two” peoples – the Byzantines and the Arabs; his real name was Basil and the epithet Akritas means “someone who lives on the borders,” a “frontiersman”). Digenes has many exploits and daring deeds, fighting brigands, and eventually marrying a beautiful girl and settling down in a lavish house on the Euphrates.

According to the research of Henri Grégoire in the 1930s, the poem reflects conditions and perhaps

even specific events on the Byzantine-Arab frontier of the ninth to tenth centuries, and Digenes may have been an actual historical figure. Probably the most striking element is the lack of hostility between the two peoples, who are pictured as more similar to each other than different; they were united in their dislike of the brigands and in their enjoyment of a wealthy aristocratic lifestyle. Although later (probably monastic) editors added pious Christian sentiments to the poem, much of the content shows little concern for religion, and one of the most striking events concerns the hero's adultery and then murder of the woman involved. In addition, the poem provides a certainly exaggerated depiction of an aristocratic house, with its lush garden and ceiling mosaics depicting Old Testament scenes, along with representations from classical mythology and the life of Alexander the Great. The poem also provides information on aristocratic pursuits such as hunting, practicing feats of strength, and of course fighting.

Although *Digenes Akritas* has some of the character of an epic, it more closely resembles the form of romance. As such, in the edited forms in which the poem has come down to us, it is a reflection of the individualism that developed in Byzantium during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

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right of peasants to keep their farms. In this regard, he restated the policies of his predecessors forbidding the alienation of peasant land, and he even withdrew the provision of a 30-year limit for the return of such purchases. He went further than his predecessors and took the novel step of making the *dynatoi* (powerful landowners) responsible for payment of the *allelengyon*, the default payment for insolvent peasants that had previously been borne by the community as a whole. He was equally stringent in his attempt to prevent the alienation of peasant land by monasteries and the church. All of these efforts, of course, flew in the face of the dominant economic and social trends of the day, and – despite the emperor's occasionally violent attempts at enforcement – it is questionable whether such a policy could have been successful. Basil's actions, however, were the strongest of the attempts by the Macedonian emperors to defend the peasants against the growing power of the landed magnates.

Modern historians have spilt much ink in discussing the effect of the long defense of peasant lands by the Macedonian dynasty and the ultimate failure of that policy. As mentioned, it is hard to think the Macedonian emperors could have done anything more. They were clearly acting, in part, in defense of the institution of an army made up of native soldiers supported in part by the land grants given them by the state. In addition, however, the emperors were motivated by an abstract concept of justice in which the state had an obligation to protect the weak in their attempt to defend themselves against the strong

(*dynatoi*). As the representatives of Christ, the emperors were meant to be *philanthropoi* (those who care for human welfare) and in the best circumstances many emperors clearly took this duty very seriously.

In foreign affairs, Basil II's greatest challenge was Samuel's revived Bulgarian Empire, and he approached this struggle with the same methodical determination that characterized all other aspects of his reign. Still remembering his defeat at Trajan's Gate, in 991 Basil invaded Samuel's territory, but his successful campaign was soon interrupted by trouble in the East, where the Fatimids threatened Byzantine positions in northern Syria. Basil traveled to the East and was able to restore Byzantine supremacy with a significant victory in 995. Samuel, meanwhile, was able to take advantage of Basil's absence and his armies advanced south into Greece, reaching as far as the Peloponnesos. On his return to the Balkans in 1001 Basil embraced the struggle with Samuel. Basil first moved against the old Bulgarian capital of Pliska, and his success there cut Samuel's empire in half. The emperor then turned south into Macedonia, winning victory after victory. After four years of nearly ceaseless warfare the Byzantine Empire was once again supreme in the Balkans, but Samuel still held out and the war continued at a reduced level. Finally, in 1014, a great battle at Kleidion (on the Strymon River north of Serres in Macedonia; Map 9.1) resulted in the complete victory of Basil and the capture, allegedly, of 14,000 prisoners. Although Samuel escaped the debacle, he could not survive the aftermath: Basil – afterwards always known as *Bulgaroktonos* (Bulgar-Slayer) – blinded the prisoners and sent them off to Samuel in groups of 100 men, each led by a one-eyed guide. When the tsar viewed this sight, he suffered a stroke and died almost immediately afterward.

There was some further resistance, first from Samuel's son and then from other relatives, but in 1018 Bulgaria surrendered completely and Basil entered Ochrid in triumph. After a struggle of nearly 30 years Basil had accomplished his goal, and the whole of the southern Balkan peninsula was under Byzantine control – for the first time since the seventh century. Contrary to the policies of his predecessors, he did not leave Bulgaria as an allied client state, but rather annexed the center of Samuel's empire, dividing it into *themes*. The outlying areas, such as Croatia and Dioclea (including Rascia and Bosnia), continued to be ruled by native princes, who were seen as Byzantine vassals. Basil sought to respect the special importance of Bulgaria, and, although he suppressed the independent patriarchate of Ochrid, he made the archbishop autocephalous, meaning that he was not subject to the authority of the patriarchate of

Constantinople, but, in this case at least, he was directly responsible to the emperor himself.

After his unprecedented victory in the Balkans, and although he was well over 60 years of age, Basil II turned his attention to affairs in Asia, where he successfully intervened in Armenia and established new *themes* and other military districts in a wide arc from north to south, extending well into Mesopotamia. Toward the end of his life Basil turned to the West, where Otto III was well disposed to cooperate with Byzantium. The western emperor had even requested an imperial bride, and an agreement was reached, but Otto died in 1002, putting a halt to this initiative. Basil, meanwhile, reorganized Byzantine territories in Italy, and he was making preparations for a great campaign against the Arabs in the West when he died in December 1025.

Constantine VIII (1025–1028)

As mentioned, Basil had no heirs, and he was therefore succeeded by his brother Constantine VIII, who had long shared the imperial throne with him, at least in name. Constantine was already old when Basil died, but he resisted pressure from the large landowners and the church to abandon the policies of his brother. In 1028 Constantine fell seriously ill, and only at this point did he take measures for the succession. He also had no sons, but three daughters, the eldest of whom had entered the monastic life. Succession, therefore, was to be passed to his two other daughters, Zoe and Theodora, who, by this time, were no longer young themselves. In November 1028 Constantine arranged for Zoe to marry Romanos Argyros, the prefect of the city, and in December the last Macedonian emperor died.

Romanos III Argyros (1028–1034)

Romanos Argyros was a member of what we may call the Byzantine civil aristocracy, those families who – although they normally held substantial agricultural properties in the provinces – owed their prominence to their administrative positions at court, which meant that they were, generally speaking, lacking in military experience but were highly educated and fully familiar with classical culture. Despite his administrative experience, Romanos Argyros was hardly successful as an emperor. Apparently filled with delusions of grandeur, he attempted various ambitious schemes, including a military

campaign in the East, where the situation was saved only by the intervention of the accomplished general George Maniakis.

Most important, Romanos III completely abandoned the Macedonian emperors' policy concerning landholding. He yielded to the pressure of the *dynatoi*, and the institution of the *allelengyon* was abolished. The old laws against the alienation of peasant holdings remained on the books, but there was no attempt at rigorous enforcement and, as a result, peasant land continued to disappear into the increasingly large holdings of the great landowners.

Romanos III made the mistake of ignoring Zoe, the ultimate source of his political authority. As a result she formed a liaison with Michael, a peasant from Paphlagonia, who had been brought to the palace by his brother, the eunuch John the Orphanotrophos, who hoped by this means to gain greater power for himself. In the end Romanos III was murdered in his bath (1034) and Zoe married Michael, who ascended the throne as Michael IV the Paphlagonian.

Michael IV the Paphlagonian (1034–1041) and Michael V Kalaphates (1041–1042)

John the Orphanotrophos essentially administered the state in the name of his brother. He was a capable ruler, although his ruthless taxation policies earned him a reputation for rapaciousness. John sought to tax the substantial wealth of the *dynatoi*, and for this he earned the support of the civil aristocracy, but his measures naturally were felt more keenly by the poor than by the wealthy, and he did nothing effective to restrict the disappearance of peasant landholding in the provinces.

Partly as a result of John's fiscal policies and partly as a reaction to apparent Byzantine military weakness, revolts broke out in the Balkans. The first of these, under Peter Deljan, sought to restore the empire of Samuel. Although this was suppressed by Michael IV himself in 1041, resentment remained among the empire's Slavic subjects, and the allied principality of Zeta (former Dioclea) was able to establish its independence from Byzantine hegemony.

Meanwhile, Michael IV had fallen ill, and John the Orphanotrophos selected as his successor a young relative, another Michael, known as Kalaphates. He succeeded Michael IV on the latter's death in 1042. Michael V Kalaphates (1041–2) was headstrong and rash and he destroyed his own base of power, first by exiling the Orphanotrophos and then by sending the empress Zoe to a monastery. The result was an almost immediate rebellion by the people of

Constantinople and the church, largely in support of the dynastic principle that accorded priority to the two aged empresses. As a result, Michael V was deposed and blinded and Zoe and Theodora were to rule jointly, an arrangement that fell apart almost immediately.

Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055) and Changes in the Structure of the State

After the brief but interesting attempt at joint rule by the two aged empresses, Zoe (then 64 years old) was married for the third time, to Constantine Monomachos, a member of the civil aristocracy and a relative of Romanos III Argyros. Court life at the time was certainly brilliant, and Constantine IX was surrounded by scholars of high caliber, such as Constantine Leichoudes, the poet John Mavropous, the jurist John Xiphilinos, and the philosopher and historian Michael Psellos, whom some have compared with the literati of the later Italian Renaissance. In 1045 the University of Constantinople was refounded with faculties of philosophy and law, and based solidly on the principles of classical education. Psellos was named as head of the university, with the high-sounding title of “Consul of the Philosophers.” At court the two empresses ruled jointly with Constantine IX, but they were openly joined in official functions by the emperor’s mistress Sklerina (niece of his second wife), who was given the newly created title of *sebaste*.

Figure 11.2 Mosaic of Constantine IX and Zoe, east wall of the south gallery of Hagia Sophia. The emperor and the empress are shown making donations to Christ, who is shown seated and blessing the imperial couple. The background of the mosaic is made with small cubes of glass that have thin sheets of pure gold fused into them. The garments of Christ, the emperor, and the empress are beautiful and elaborate; especially impressive are the jewels shown on the robes of Constantine and Zoe. The title above the emperor reads “Constantine Monomachos, in Christ God the pious autocrat, emperor of the Romans.” Zoe’s title is “Zoe, the most pious Augusta.” It is clear that the name of the emperor has been changed in the mosaic and a close examination shows that the heads of all three figures have been replaced. It is likely that the mosaic was originally made to honor Zoe’s former husband, Romanos III Argyros, or her adopted son Michael V, and that it was amended after Constantine came to the throne, but other scenarios are also possible. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



The dominance of the civil aristocracy under Constantine IX did not mean that measures were taken to limit the power of the military aristocracy in the provinces. Indeed, this period witnessed the continued growth of large landholdings and the tendency for the state to surrender some of its prerogatives to the *dynatoi*. Most notably, the landowners were increasingly given grants of *exkousseia*, which exempted them from the payment of taxes, and many were also granted judicial immunity, so that all legal disputes among individuals living on their land would be settled in their courts. In this respect, the landed aristocracy effectively escaped the control of the state, and this was a significant development in a society that had preserved, from its very beginning, the institution of the sovereign political state. Even where the state maintained control, its functioning was restricted – or we might even say “privatized” – by developments such as the increasing reliance on tax farming, a system in which individuals or corporations formed for this purpose essentially purchased the right to collect taxes in certain areas: they paid a set sum to the state and then attempted to raise more than that amount from the hapless peasants.

An important phenomenon in this regard was the development of the so-called *pronoia* system, which came to dominate landholding over the next several centuries. This was a system that bears some resemblance to the western European feudal system, although there are important differences, which will be discussed below. A grant of *pronoia* (the word means a benefit or a gift) meant that an individual was given a portion of state-owned land in return for some specified service that the grantee rendered to the state. In return, the grantee –

the *pronoiar* – was free to use the territory as he saw fit and to collect all the revenues from the land and any taxes due from it. This system effectively alienated territories from state control, and in this respect it has certain similarities to western feudalism. The *pronoia* system came into existence by the middle of the eleventh century, but it was not immediately widespread. It was different from western feudalism in several important ways. First of all, despite the effective diminution of state power, the concept of the state never disappeared from Byzantium, and even the *pronoiers* acknowledged the theoretical sovereignty of the emperor. Furthermore, the grant of *pronoia* was supposedly limited to a specific period of time, and it was not supposed to be transferable either by grant or inheritance; it was also not divisible, so that land

Box 11.3 The Historian Michael Psellos

Michael Psellos (1018–ca.1081) was one of the greatest of the Byzantine historians, but he was much more than that. Perhaps more than any other writer, he characterizes Byzantine writing and culture. He wrote works concerned with philosophy, theology, rhetoric, law, and medicine, and he published a collection of letters. His broad learning and individualism make him perhaps the best example of the humanism of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Psellos' original name was Constantine, but he took the name Michael when he entered a monastery. He received an excellent education in Constantinople and held a number of posts in the imperial administration. Psellos was a member of a group of intellectuals who hoped to influence politics under Constantine IX (1042–55) but he fell into disgrace and entered a monastery on Mount Olympos. He soon returned to Constantinople, however, and resumed a place at court, holding the position of *hypatos ton philosophon* (consul of the philosophers), effectively head of the philosophical school of the capital.

Psellos' best-known work is the *Chronographia*, a historical work describing the period 976 to 1078, much of it based on his own personal observations. The *Chronographia* is arranged as a series of imperial biographies, in which the court and the emperors play the central role, with military and foreign affairs generally far from his field of view. Psellos saw the course of history as the result of human character and conflict among individuals rather than as the outcome of divine will. He wrote in the first person and his focus is always from his own point of view. The psychological studies of some of his characters are complex and interesting to modern readers. He apparently sought to understand individuals, including those with whom he did not agree, although on a few occasions his judgment seems somewhat less than fair.

Psellos was a member of what is usually called the civil aristocracy and he understood the politics of the eleventh century from that point of view. His history thus fails to take into serious consideration the military difficulties that developed during that period. With hindsight, therefore, we can criticize his work as a representation of some of the reasons for the military collapse: a focus on culture, without full realization of the changes in foreign relations; a lack of interest in the so-called military aristocracy and the fate of the peasants who had provided the basis of Byzantine strength for centuries and a self-centeredness that failed to see the many ways in which traditional Byzantine life was changing or even falling apart.

Even in his historical work Psellos was concerned with philosophical issues. He saw nature

(*physis*) as the driving force in the universe and some recent research argues that the *Chronographia* was in fact a disguised philosophical work, arguing for the secularization of Byzantine society and the end of the church's role in affairs of state. He wrote a work on the topography of ancient Athens, a paraphrase of the *Iliad*, and a list of illnesses. His multifaceted intellect and his direct involvement in the politics of the day make him one of the most interesting of Byzantine writers, and one who is immediately accessible to most modern readers.

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granted in *pronoia* could not be divided up and passed on to the *pronoiar's* underlings, as in the medieval West. Nonetheless, the practice of *pronoia*, along with other similar grants, certainly had the effect of limiting the real power of the state, and it presumably placed severe limitations on the income available to the central administration.

The expenses of the state, however, did not diminish significantly, and the emperors finally took the step that previous rulers had avoided for 700 years: they began the devaluation of the Byzantine coinage. Thus, apparently during the reign of Michael IV, silver was added to the gold used for coins, allowing the state to strike more money with the same amount of precious metal. This provided the state with a temporary windfall in order to meet current expenses, but the long-term results were certainly disastrous. The Byzantine *nomisma* had long been the accepted currency for foreign exchange, and this brought Byzantium a considerable international prestige that could not be maintained with an unstable currency. Furthermore, the economic advantage of debasement to the state could be maintained only through further devaluation of the coinage, and this was a temptation that few future emperors could resist. In modern times we can see the effect of currency deterioration, largely in the form of runaway inflation, something that the Byzantine economy probably experienced. It is, however, difficult to measure the full impact of this phenomenon, in part because the effect of debasement was restricted largely to the gold coinage that was used mostly by the wealthier sections of the population, while the impact on the poor is uncertain. In particular, it is difficult to estimate the effect of debasement on trade, which was not, in any case, the dominant element of the Byzantine economy.

Just as important, the middle of the eleventh century witnessed the decline in the regular, enlisted Byzantine army. This was a result of several contemporary

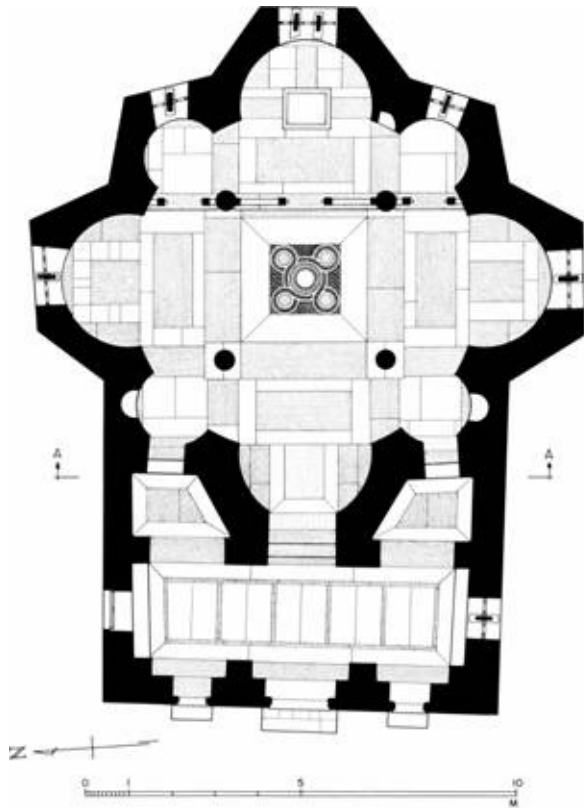
phenomena, one of which – the destruction of peasant-soldier holdings – has already been discussed. Further, the government of Constantine IX was decidedly anti-military in its policies, and it failed to provide funds for the army or to reward its commanders for work well done. In its search for ready income the state allowed soldiers to buy off their obligation to serve in the army. The result of this important phenomenon was that the state had to rely more and more on foreign mercenaries, at first Varangians from Russia but increasingly Normans from Italy and France, Anglo-Saxons from England, and others. The most famous of these was the Varangian *Dužina*, attested from 1034 onward, which enrolled Vikings from Russia and eventually Anglo-Saxons. This elite guard, whose members had distinctive arms and uniforms, had its quarters in Constantinople but also took part in field campaigns. In addition, Byzantium had to depend more than before on its alliances with foreign peoples who might be used to fight the empire's wars. The decline of the domestic army thus had far-reaching ramifications. There were also administrative repercussions: the *strategos*, commander of the thematic armies, essentially disappeared, replaced by the provincial governor (normally the *kritis*), who had previously been his subordinate.

Several revolts broke out against Constantine IX, led by the successful generals George Maniakis and (later) Leo Tornikis; both of these nearly succeeded in toppling the civil administration, but in both cases fate intervened and the revolts failed. In the meantime, the peace brought by the success of the great military emperors remained generally undisturbed and Byzantine arms – for the moment – remained unchallenged. Nonetheless, the international scene was changing slowly, and new adversaries arrived who would seriously challenge Byzantium in the years to come.

By the middle of the eleventh century the Abbasid caliphate had all but disappeared; effective power was now in the hands of various Muslim dynasties, from the Fatimids in Egypt to the Seljuks on the empire's eastern frontier. In the Balkans, Bulgaria had essentially disappeared, and the Russians turned their attention to the north, leaving the steppe corridor to people such as the Patzinaks, Cumans, and Uzes. Perhaps most menacing of all were the Normans, who had been established in Sicily and southern Italy for some time. They had, of course, originally come from Scandinavia and had plundered much of northern Europe, from the river systems of Russia (where they were known as Varangians) to the coasts of Britain and France. Settled in northern France from at least the tenth century onward, they intermarried with the local population and adopted the

local Romance language. Various Norman adventurers set out from France, perhaps the best known to conquer Britain in 1066. Probably recruited as mercenaries by the Byzantines or the Lombard princes, they formed principalities in southern Italy at the end of the tenth or the beginning of the eleventh century. Despite the efforts of generals, such as Maniatis, the Normans contested control of the Byzantine holdings in Italy, culminating eventually in the fall of Bari in 1071. In the 1060s they began the conquest of Sicily and by 1072 they held the whole of the island. These rapid victories totally changed the equilibrium of power in Italy and the old foes of the Byzantines, the Lombards and Arabs, were quickly replaced by the new and clearly expansionist power of the Normans. Other European states, especially the papacy and the German Empire, were especially fearful of increasing Norman power, while Byzantium was already aware that it might, for the first time, face a direct threat from that direction.

Figure 11.3 Plan of the church of the Holy Apostles in Athens. This small church was built on the site of the market place (*agora*) of ancient Athens about the year 1000. It was a tetraconch, which means that the four sides of the building ended in an apse; between each of the main apses were smaller subsidiary apses, turning the building into an octagon at floor level. The church has a dome supported on four freestanding columns (shown in the plan as four small dark circles around the central square design in the floor). The building was excavated and restored by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. Reproduced with permission from the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.



The Division of the Churches (1054)

Late in the reign of Constantine IX the definitive split between the eastern and western churches took place, an event that continues to have significance today and that seriously influenced Byzantium's relations with the West from that time on. It was especially unfortunate for the empire that, just as Christian western Europe began to emerge as a real economic, political, and military power, its natural alliance with Byzantium foundered on the rocks of religious disagreement and misunderstanding. The basic cause of the schism was, as previously in the time of Photios, the cultural gulf that had grown over the centuries between eastern and western Christianity: although Byzantines and westerners were all Christians, in basic outlook and in many aspects of their faith they were worlds apart. In addition, the conflict was fanned by historical circumstances and the personalities of the characters involved. The papacy in the mid eleventh century was in the midst of its greatest period of reform and was locked in the beginning of a struggle with the western emperor for supremacy in western Europe. Its claims to universality had become an essential part of papal policy in a way that was bound to clash with Byzantine concepts of ecclesiastical

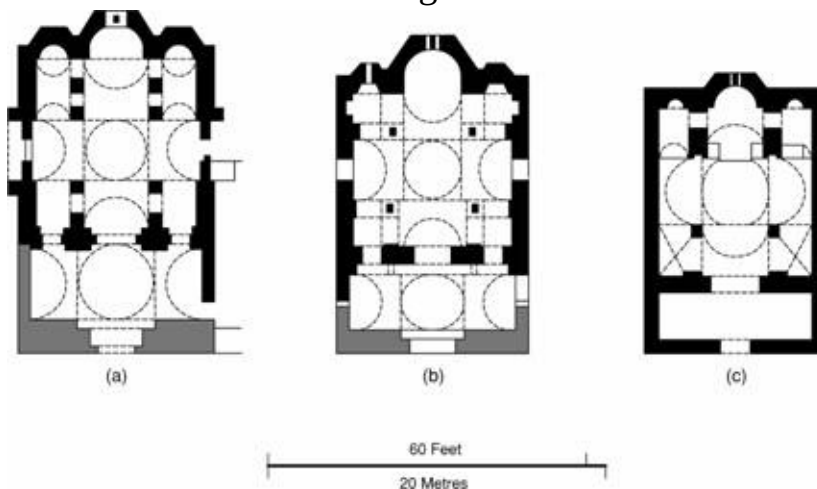
independence and imperial universality. The old theological issue of the *filioque* remained unresolved: this was a serious disagreement about the relationship among the three persons of the Trinity; the Latin church argued that the addition of the term “and from the Son” to the Nicene Creed did not change its essence, while the eastern church argued that the difference was fundamental to our understanding of God. There were also liturgical and practical matters such as the issue of a celibate priesthood, fasting on Saturday, and the use of unleavened bread (the so-called *azymes*), all of which were characteristic of the West but not of the East. Over the past several centuries there had been significant disagreements and breaks in communion, most notably the Akakian Schism, Iconoclasm, and the Photian Schism. And overall, the two major halves of Christianity had in large part gone different ways in terms of culture, so that, although the two parties believed essentially the same things, they looked at the world very differently and had built up a large reserve of mistrust. Finally, there was the key issue of papal supremacy: the western church increasingly argued that the pope should have administrative control of the whole Christian church, while the easterners denied this and said that the five patriarchs should independently control their respective areas.

Figure 11.4 Church of the Holy Apostles in Athens, view from east. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



Figure 11.5 Several cross-in-square churches: Kaisariani (a) and St. John the

Theologian (b) (both in the outskirts of Athens), and St. John the Almsgiver, Ligourio in the Argolid (c). The cross-in-square type became standard in the middle Byzantine centuries. This style of building was elegant, compact, reasonably easy to build, and well suited to the needs of the Byzantine liturgy. The ground plan of the church is essentially a square, but four columns, piers, or a combination of both at the center allow construction of four barrel vaults that run, like the arms of a cross, to the exterior walls. A masonry drum is then built in the center, where the vaults meet, and this terminates, above, in a dome. Thus, the building is transformed from one that is essentially rectilinear (the square or rectangle at ground level), to one that is curvilinear (the cylinder of the drum and the halfsphere of the dome). This transformation was perceived not only as an architectural phenomenon but also as a spiritual or theological one, as the relatively “weak” form of the lower part of the church is transformed into the “powerful,” indeed “perfect,” shape of the dome, symbolizing the transformation of humans into divine beings.



Just as in the days of the Photian Schism, the western church was in the early stages of a reform movement that sought to use papal power as a means to bring about moral reform of the clergy and to establish the church’s independence of the secular rulers of the time, especially the emperors of the Western (German) Empire. In this regard, the ambitions and the demands of the papacy quickly ran afoul of the independence of the eastern church which seemed to the popes as willful and unacceptable. Pope Leo IX, the first of the reforming popes of the eleventh century, was strong-willed and proud, outdone in this regard only by his representative in the controversy, Cardinal Humbert. The patriarch, Michael Keroularios, was in all respects a match for his adversaries; early involved in political activity in Constantinople, he had become a monk and, as patriarch

since 1043, he brought all his confidence and self-importance to this office. Both sides were uncompromising and ready for conflict, which first broke out over rival claims for ecclesiastical authority in south Italy. A papal delegation, led by Cardinal Humbert, arrived in Constantinople in 1054. Encouraged by the emperor's apparent lack of support for Keroularios, the papal party condemned the Byzantines and excommunicated the patriarch and his followers. Keroularios had the full support of his church and the people of Constantinople, and he quickly brought Constantine IX into line, summoning a council that met in the same year, issued a condemnation of all the Roman practices, and excommunicated the papal legates. The break between the eastern and the western churches in 1054 has never been healed. As mentioned above, the two groups believe and practice many of the same things, but the schism has been the cause of much misunderstanding, hostility, and bloodshed ever since, and has remained one of the main points of division between eastern and western Europe in recent centuries.

Constantine IX died in January 1055, and Theodora reigned in her own name until her death the next year. With her passing, the Macedonian dynasty was at last extinct. On her deathbed Theodora nominated Michael VI (1055–7, known as Michael Stratiotikos or Michael the Old), a member of the civil aristocracy who continued the policies of Constantine IX. Not surprisingly, a revolt broke out among the military aristocracy, led by Isaac Komnenos, a member of an important military family from Asia Minor. Disturbances also began in Constantinople, and the patriarch Keroularios joined the insurgents. Michael VI abdicated and Isaac Komnenos (1057–9) was crowned emperor.

The Battle of Mantzikert (1071)

The period since the death of Basil II in 1025 had been marked, as we have seen, by the dominance of the civil aristocracy and neglect of the military needs of the state. Isaac Komnenos sought to redress that balance and he made significant moves to strengthen the empire's defenses. A difficulty, of course, was the lack of funds for the military, and Isaac resorted to extreme measures, including the confiscation of property and the possessions of the church. As we have seen, the patriarch had originally supported Isaac, but the two soon came into conflict, in part over Isaac's confiscation policy, but also over ideological issues, since Keroularios sought nothing less than the full independence of the church, if not the recognition of the superiority of the church to the state; it was even said that

the patriarch, on one occasion, put on the purple boots that were one of the main symbols of imperial power. Eventually the emperor and the patriarch came to a formal understanding of an equal division of power, but both were headstrong and determined, and both frequently violated this agreement. Finally, when Keroularios was out of Constantinople in 1058, he was arrested and a council quickly summoned to condemn and depose him. Keroularios died shortly thereafter, but Isaac's success was short-lived, since the church and many of the people of Constantinople were offended by his treatment of the patriarch, and the civil aristocracy used this to fuel opposition to the emperor. Ill and disillusioned, Isaac Komnenos abdicated in 1059 and retired to the monastery of Stoudios.

The alliance between the leaders of the church and members of the civil aristocracy selected Constantine X Doukas (1059–67) as emperor. Constantine was a member of the distinguished family of Doukas, who at this time represented the civil aristocracy of the capital. He was a devoted follower of Psellos, who became the tutor of his children, and he returned to the fiscal politics of Constantine IX, including the debasement of the coinage and the expenditure of resources in Constantinople rather than on the army. The civil service grew in numbers and expense and the army was completely neglected.

Unfortunately, this neglect of the military came at a time when, as we have seen, the enemies of Byzantium were gathering strength on several fronts. The most immediate of these threats was in south Italy, where the Norman principalities were united under Robert Guiscard and were pushing the Byzantines out of their remaining possessions. In the Balkans, Byzantine territory was threatened by attacks from several groups: the Hungarians from the northwest and the Uzes and the Cumans from the northeast. But ultimately the greatest danger was posed by the Seljuk Turks, who had gained control of Iran and Iraq and virtually the whole of the Near East up to the borders of Byzantium on the west and the Fatimid caliphate of Egypt on the south. Under the leadership of Alp Arslan, the second Seljuk sultan, the Seljuks attacked Armenia and broke into Asia Minor, advancing as far as Caesarea, which they took in 1067.

At this point, Constantine X died, and his wife Eudokia acted as regent for her young sons. Power remained in the hands of the civil administrators but in the end the military situation was so dangerous that even the patriarch, John Xiphilinos, saw the need for accommodation with the military aristocracy, and Eudokia was convinced to marry the general Romanos Diogenes, who ascended the throne as Romanos IV (1068–71).

Romanos IV had further problems with conspirators who wanted to protect the rights of Eudokia's sons who were still young. His primary concern, however, was to rebuild the army in Asia Minor. As a result of this focus on the East, Byzantine interests in Italy were neglected, and Bari, the last Byzantine stronghold, fell to the Normans in 1071 (Map 9.1). Romanos made expeditions to eastern Anatolia in 1068–9, but the Seljuks used the opportunity to seize Byzantine cities in the center. In 1071 Romanos led a large army, perhaps as many as 200,000 men, including many foreign contingents, in a monumental effort to drive the Seljuks from Asia Minor; a key element in the army was a group of Norman mercenaries under the adventurer Roussel de Bailleul. In August the forces of Romanos IV met those of the Seljuk Sultan Alp Arslan in a pitched battle near Mantzikert in Armenia (Map 9.1). As soon as the fighting began the Norman troops fled the field and the Byzantines were caught in a trap. In a second day of fighting Romanos was moving successfully against the Seljuk center, when his rival Andronikos Doukas encouraged a rumor that the emperor had been killed. Panic spread among the troops and many fled. The Seljuks made skillful use of their lightly armed, mounted archers, the Byzantines were thoroughly defeated, and Romanos was taken prisoner.

Figure 11.6 Coin of Romanos IV (1068–71). This coin shows, among other things, how complicated the dynastic situation had become at this time.

Romanos had been forced to accept the three sons of his predecessor Constantine X as his colleagues: Michael VII, Konstantinos, and Andronikos. These three are shown on the reverse (right in the illustration), with Michael VII in the center. On the obverse Christ is depicted crowning Romanos (on the left) and his wife Eudoxia (on the right). Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Thomas Whittemore. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College.



Modern historians have made much of the Battle of Mantzikert, seeing it as the fatal defeat from which the empire never recovered. On the contrary, the

Byzantine losses were relatively small and Romanos himself was soon released, agreeing only to cede Armenia to the Turks. The real difficulty lay in the aftermath of the battle, in which the army commanders immediately deserted their posts in Asia Minor in a mad scramble for power in Constantinople. As a result the countryside lay open to the Seljuks, who were able to occupy much of Asia Minor and settle in it, virtually without opposition from the Byzantines. Immediately after the battle the caesar John Doukas proclaimed Michael Doukas, son of Constantine X, as sole emperor. Romanos IV attempted to reclaim his place, but he lost to the supporters of the Doukas family and was blinded. Michael VII Doukas (1071–8) was generally ineffective, although several important developments took place during his reign. Occupied first with the civil war and inattentive to military considerations, Michael was unable to oppose the Seljuks, who flooded Asia Minor and established the sultanate of Rum in Ikonion, the first foreign state to occupy part of the Byzantine heartland of Anatolia. About 1074 an alliance was made with the Norman Robert Guiscard, whose daughter was to marry Michael's son Constantine, the presumptive heir to the throne. Throughout the reign of Michael VII the empire remained in dire financial straits. The courtier Nikephoritzes had become the main civil administrator of Michael VII and he used harsh measures in an attempt to restore some form of fiscal stability. These included the regulation of the grain supply of Constantinople, the continued devaluation of the coinage, and a decrease in the size of the *modios*, the main Byzantine measure of grain, by a *pinakion* (about a quarter of a *modios*), a policy that earned for the emperor the nickname "Parapinakis."

Not surprisingly, Michael VII's reign was marked by revolts, the most important of which were by Nikephoros Vryennios in the Balkans and Nikephoros Votaneiates in Asia Minor. The latter secured support from the Seljuks, and entered Constantinople in 1078, shortly after the abdication of Michael VII. Votaneiates had been an effective general, but he was now elderly, and the financial situation forced him to devalue the coinage further in order to make lavish payments to his supporters. In this unstable situation more revolts were inevitable and in 1081 he was overthrown by Alexios Komnenos, who at last managed to provide some continuity and strength on the Byzantine throne.

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